

Evaluate, Evaluate, Evaluate

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Our fifth national workshop

For many reasons, now seems a good time to pause and take stock. UniServe Science is six years old. It's eleven years since the establishment of the Web. It's a new millennium. Whatever.

Over the past decade we've heard many times that university education is going to have to change to meet the new demands that threaten it, and that we must adopt the new technologies that are supposed to support it. Unfortunately, from where we sit, there isn't much evidence that this change is happening very fast. A lot (the bulk?) of university teaching is going on as it has done for generations. Lectures, laboratories, homework assignments, examinations. Those of us who have been the advocates for change cannot help getting a bit dispirited sometimes. Why haven't the new teaching methods and the new teaching technologies been taken up more enthusiastically?

There are lots of answers to that question, and lots of people to blame. But every now and then one feels the insidious worry: is it our fault? Is it really obvious that the CAL packages, the Web material and the computer assessment schemes that we have been working on all these years really deserve to be taken up? All those simulations and visualizations that looked so great to us, were they really successful where it counted? Did they improve student learning?

For many years now, the educationalists have been warning us that we must **evaluate** the teaching materials we produce. And they mean more than testing whether things are laid out properly, or whether the interface is intuitive. They mean we must also find out what students learned from using all this stuff. And that's hard to do. Which is why so few of us have done it properly. But it's time to change our ways. If we want to tell our colleagues that they should learn from what we did, then we must be able to say with confidence that what we did, worked. We've just got to spend a lot more time evaluating.

So this annual UniServe Science workshop targeted evaluation, not just of IT materials but of teaching techniques in general.

Issues raised at the workshop

There were two keynote speakers: Professor Mike Prosser from La Trobe University (at that time), talked about the educational aspects of evaluation, and Professor Ann Sefton, the leader of the Graduate Medical Program at The University of Sydney told us about one of the largest Internet-based teaching programs in the country, which has had evaluation built in from the start. There were 82 academics attending from most states of this country, including one visitor from New Zealand and seven from Thailand. There were seven contributed papers. All these papers appear on the succeeding pages.

As is now the tradition at UniServe Science annual workshops, the last session of the day was devoted to an open-floor discussion of issues raised during the day. Three questions occupied most of the discussion. As usual, opinions differed, and a variety of interesting points were made.

(1) How can we who value innovation in teaching convert our colleagues?

There were those who felt that it had to happen by example. Innovations that are successful will impress others and a ripple effect will ensure that these new ideas will be accepted by the more conservative teachers. Others were less optimistic and felt that successful innovations had to come from the top down. If they are not promoted by heads of departments or deans, they are unlikely to be widely adopted. Perhaps the main need was for more professional development to bring the information to those who do not perceive there is a problem in the first place.

(2) How can we assess whether learning is 'deep'?

Among the ideas brought out by the keynote speakers was the thought that students needed to have more ownership of their studies. In discussion it was felt that we should make students aware of the approaches to learning and get them to think about how they study, and perhaps then they might adopt a more responsible approach to assessment.

It was believed that IT had the capacity to allow for variation in ways of examining, and this could lead to assessment for deeper learning. However it is important not to trivialize assessment. Lastly, while there is a need to make students enthusiastic about the subject matter, it must be remembered that depth of learning is a desire to understand. It is not the same as enthusiasm for the subject.

(3) Are universities under threat from commercialization of tertiary education?

There is a foreseeable threat that private companies could seek to take over the teaching of the more popular first year courses. If that happened, it would mean that universities would have to specialize much more in what we offer students. Certainly there is a decline in postgraduate student numbers, and we need to investigate more aggressively web delivery of graduate courses. Maybe, in the end, there will be a need for some kind of liaison between the smaller universities and large consortiums or franchises.

Pearson Education UniServe Science Teaching Award

At the workshop, an award that recognises teaching that improves student learning outcomes via the innovative and integrated use of information technology, was launched by UniServe Science Deputy Director, Bob Hewitt and Susannah Bowen, Pearson Education Australia, co-sponsors of the award. The winner of the award will be an invited keynote speaker at next year's workshop and will receive \$1000. For more details on this award visit

<http://science.uniserve.edu.au/about/award/>.